

***Silent Witnesses:***  
***Re-interpreting the Still Life Tradition***

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree Master of Fine Art

School of Art, University of Tasmania, April 2010

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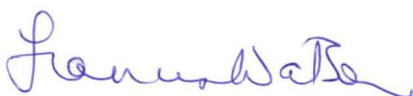
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## **Abstract**

This research investigates how simple domestic objects can be employed as visual metaphors for vulnerability, entrapment and unfulfilled expectations experienced by many women who take on primary domestic roles. In its use of domestic objects as visual metaphors, the project locates itself within the context of the still life genre but at the same time seeks to re-interpret this tradition in a way which makes it relevant to contemporary concerns.

The exegesis contextualises the project through discussion of what the domestic object traditionally symbolised in the history of Western art, specifically looking at the still life and narrative genre painting which used the domestic object to deliver moralising and ideological messages. The discussion then focuses, on artists who in the twentieth century re-deployed domestic objects in other ways, wresting them from their traditional meanings. Of particular relevance to the project is how artists moved away from painterly depictions of domestic objects to assimilating the ephemera of daily life into their work and also how they have invested them with meanings which challenge the traditional concept of home as a safe and nurturing environment. In this regard, the artists who have been most relevant to the project have been feminist artists such as Donna Marcus, Vivienne Binns, Helen Fuller, Judy Chicago, Faith Ringgold, Miriam Schapiro and Louise Bourgeois. These artists reference domestic objects as an appropriate visual vehicle to tell their stories, seek equality and reconcile their identities as both women and artists.

The outcomes of studio-based investigations are encapsulated in a suite of mixed media artworks that explore different ways of engaging with domestic objects. The materials include paper and glass to reference vulnerability and fragility, while all the objects have been made using recycled materials and collage to invoke memory of a lived experience. Everyday acts of sewing and patchwork are employed to parallel the tedium, repetition and the entrapment of domestic obligations.

The use of symbolism and metaphor connect my work to the historic tradition of still life; the use of found objects, materials and process connect it to the many conceptual and material changes that have affected the genre over the last one hundred years. Whilst the project acknowledges that the still life does not hold the same cultural importance that it once had, it does, however, suggest that this tradition can be re-interpreted and re-worked to express current day concerns, particularly those pertaining to the experience of women and the domestic sphere. As such, it builds on the works of feminist artists such as Chicago and Schapiro but, at the same time, goes beyond their concerns of celebrating the female crafts.



## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Mary Scott and Dr Llewellyn Negrin for their assistance, support and astute observations during the course of the research project and in preceding years. I would also like to express my gratitude to my husband, Richard for his love, generosity and unquestioning support.

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## **Introduction**

The aims of this project are twofold. The first investigates how simple domestic objects can be employed as visual metaphors for the experiences of many women within the domestic sphere. Experiences specific to the inquiry include vulnerability, entrapment and lack of fulfilment. The second aim is to demonstrate how the still life genre can be re-worked in such a way as to address issues of contemporary concern.

In order to find a visual language with which to express women's experiences within the domestic sphere, I began by investigating what the domestic object traditionally symbolised in the history of Western art. I concentrated on still life and narrative genre painting which, until the nineteenth century, used the domestic object to deliver moralising and ideological messages. I also investigated how, in the twentieth century, artists began re-deploying domestic objects in other ways, wresting them from their traditional meanings.

Of particular interest to me, and crucial to my own methodology, is how artists in the twentieth century have moved away from painterly depictions of domestic objects to assimilating the ephemera of daily life into their work and, also, how they have vested them with meanings which challenge our traditional conceptions of home as a nurturing and safe environment. In this regard, the artists who have been most relevant to my concerns have been feminist artists such as: Donna Marcus, Vivienne Binns, Helen Fuller, Louise Bourgeois, Faith Ringgold, Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago. These women have referenced

domestic objects as an appropriate visual vehicle to tell their stories, seek equality and to reconcile their identities both as women and as artists. Of the more recent artists who have benefited from the ground laid by the above feminists, I refer to Rachel Whiteread and Mona Hartoum.

Together with this knowledge, and studio-based investigations, a series of methodologies were identified and developed. The result is a group of objects, submitted for examination, that have been made using materials and processes derived from the domestic sphere which are employed to subvert the notion of the home as a nurturing and safe environment. The materials include paper and glass to reference vulnerability and fragility. I have produced a collage from found scraps of paper to highlight the memory of a lived experience, and have employed sewing and patchwork to symbolise tedium, repetition and the entrapment of domestic duties. I have also assembled re-cycled materials, such as old drawers and windows using scale to reference the enormity of secrets and lies often found within the domestic sphere, and a washing machine piled high with domestic glassware, symbolising, amongst other things, the delicate balance between domestic order and chaos.

The use of domestic objects as symbols and metaphors is a device that connects my work to the historic tradition of still life, and the employment of found objects, materials and process connect it to the many conceptual and material changes that have affected the genre over the last one hundred years. In today's context, I consider that a still life is any object or tableau of objects that an artist uses to address the imagery of our daily lives and to evoke all aspects of human

experience. I see myself as contributing to the recent resurgence of interest in re-defining the still life tradition. In recent years there have been several exhibitions of the still life. Three in particular: the inaugural Balnaves Foundation sculpture project *Still Life* at the Art Gallery of NSW (curator, Tunnicliffe, 2003 ), *Snap Freeze* at the TarraWarra Museum of Art (curator Blyth, 2007) and *Domestic Incidents*, at the Tate Modern in London (curator, Sainsbury, 2006) have shown that still life as a genre is still evolving and relevant in contemporary art practice. Whilst some works appear in these exhibitions as faithful depictions of inanimate objects, their subject matter lies in notions of time, space, memory and the lived experience. The works explore the spaces in which we live and work and the objects with which we surround ourselves. In all three exhibitions, artists address the imagery of our private lives generating both personal and political associations for the viewer. Whilst it is clear that the still life genre does not have the same cultural importance it once had, the relationships and interdependence between people and their objects are as relevant today as they ever were. We inherit and pass on objects that have family significance. Objects act as condensers of memory; we fill our homes with objects to express who we are and how we live, and it is these objects that stand as the silent witnesses to events that occur therein.

Objects continue to be both the subject and the result of artistic endeavour. As Elizabeth Grosz has said: “We actively produce, make objects in the world and in doing so, we make the world amenable to our actions, but also render ourselves vulnerable to their reactions” (Grosz 2003: 1). In this sense, artworks have an

animate and an inanimate existence. They stand still yet have the ability to express concepts, opinions and invite comment.

This ability, in my view, enables contemporary works of all disciplines, including new media, to achieve a new interpretation of the still life genre. I consider my works to be contemporary still life and, as such, they act as a link between the past and the present in the continuum of art-making.

This exegesis has been divided into four chapters and the content of each is as follows:

- Chapter one addresses the domestic object as a condenser of meaning and proposes that attachment to objects is a fundamental feature of human existence. I relate the stories associated with two of my own items of significance, which initiated the start of the project.
- Chapter two covers the association between art and the domestic object and outlines the symbolic use of such objects in art practice prior to the twentieth century. It focuses on an investigation into the still life tradition as an upholder of patriarchal values.
- Chapter three, part one, focuses on the re-interpretation of the still life tradition in the first half of the twentieth century and highlights the experiments of the modernist era when artists such as Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp sought to bring real life into the realm of still life through the use of collage and the found object. It also covers the new relationship that developed between the artist and the world of objects as

exemplified in the works of Giorgio Morandi. Part two considers those contemporary artists whose work has influenced the course of my research by their utilisation of, or references to, domestic objects as a mean to subvert the idea of home as a nurturing and safe environment. My references to contemporary artists include Donna Marcus, Vivienne Binns, Helen Fuller, Judy Chicago, Faith Ringgold, Judy Schapiro, Louise Bourgeois, Rachel Whiteread, and Mona Hartoum. The discussion of the still life tradition and its re-interpretation in Chapters two and three is not intended to be comprehensive but is deliberately selective, focusing on those aspects most pertinent to an understanding of my own work.

- Chapter four covers the studio practice and details the formal and conceptual decisions made, and technical strategies employed, during studio-based research. I include a discussion on the significance of moving from a two dimensional representation of objects to a three dimensional representation through installation practice. Each work is detailed independently.



## **Chapter One: The domestic object as condenser of meaning**

### **In the palm of my hand**

I have always been drawn to commonplace objects, organic and manufactured, and my art practice has, in recent years, concentrated on making work out of found objects. Tactility and shape are what usually first attract me, but some objects have an extra quality. It is as though they have made eye-contact with me; the object has returned my gaze. This, according to Walter Benjamin (Foster 1993:163), gives an object an aura. They become animated, even personalised, and as such, cannot be discarded easily. I know that I am not alone and it is possible that it is a trait hard-wired into human beings.

For example, 25,000 to 30,000 years ago a hunter searching for game was most probably, holding in the palm of his hand a small (11.5cm) limestone torso of a woman. Given the name *Venus* because of her large breasts, buttocks and stomach, she was, it is surmised by archaeologists, an image of fertility, and a magic charm (Honor and Fleming 1991:21). Fat was good and fertility was good; without either there was no future for the hunter, his tribe or family. I am sure that our hunter had made eye contact with *Venus* and I like to think that she was cherished and passed from one generation to the next before being abandoned in the Stone-age equivalent of the tip shop for reasons that can never be known.

There may seem to be, at this stage, a huge gap that exists between the primeval hunter and his magic charm, and the extraneous objects that people today, myself

included, cling to. But is it so different? Today we have homes in which we place cherished objects that hold deeply personal associations and meanings. They are our magic charms and, like *Venus*, function ritualistically within each owner's system of meaning. Often these objects have played important roles in events and relationships. We inherit objects, and conscious of our own transience, we pass on our treasures to the next generation, so that we too will be remembered. It is a ritual that gives one a sense of connection to the past and to the future. In my own case, there are two objects that hold particular significance for me; and these are the starting point of this project.

## **Objects**

*Things have a life of their own. It is simply a matter of waking up their souls,*  
(Marquez 1978: 9).

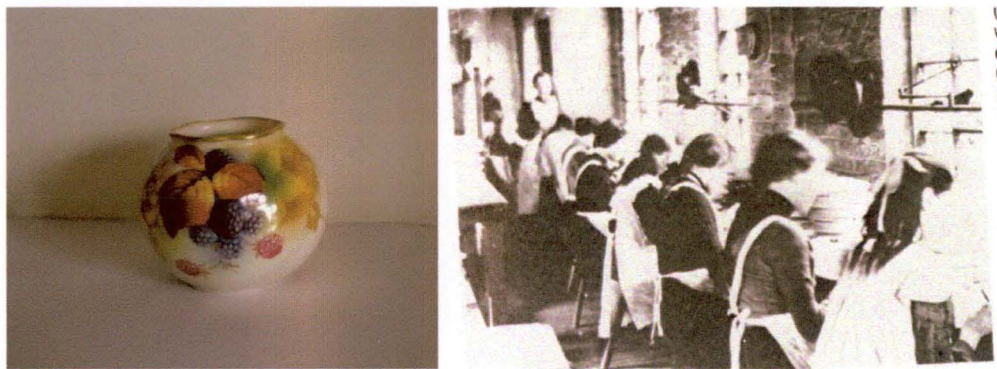
As a young woman I married into a family whose collective body language and attitudes towards me made it clear that I was not the woman they would have chosen to share their son's life. In their view, I had neither the social skills nor the background to support a young man in his professional career. To give them their due, they tried hard to help me overcome my perceived faults, but I was a less than diligent student and it was very hard for me to show anything other than disappointment when yet another gift turned out to be 'something for the home'; a set of fine damask table linen was no substitute for one's favourite perfume!

However, amongst the Tupperware, food mixers, manners and recipe books there nestled a small vase that I loved immediately and which, as it turned out, was to

change the course of my life. My mother-in-law, no doubt pleased that I was at last showing some appreciation of what were, in her view, the finer things in life, told me that it was a family piece and that she looked forward to the day when this vase and all the family property would go to her grandchildren. My eyes followed her waving arms; dark, gloomy antiques surrounded us and I began to appreciate that my allotted role, if I were to stay with this family, would be as the caretaker of someone else's history and a breeder for their future. Not surprisingly I began immediately to reshape my own future and when it came to the crunch, left the family fold, taking only the vase with me.

Taking the vase was consistent with my normal pattern of behaviour. As I have already said, I have always loved objects and as a child collected all sorts of things that had tactile quality or visual appeal and arranged them like small still lives in the tiny space allotted to me in a shared bedroom. I continued this habit into adulthood and this vase, small, plump, and just 10 centimetres high, fitted perfectly into my palm and was comforting to hold. I loved the colours of the hand-painted blackberries, evocative of damp misty Northern Hemisphere autumns. In addition I knew a little about the artist. Who said I knew nothing? I'll bet my then mother-in-law didn't know, for example, that Kitty Blake had worked as a paintress<sup>i</sup> for the Royal Worcester Potteries for 48 years (1905 - 1953). Blake's skill as a china painter enabled her to find a job that, at that time, was a socially acceptable method for a woman to earn a living. Unlike the thousands of other paintresses who worked for the potteries, Blake, as an acknowledgment of her skill, had been allowed to sign her work and leave us

with a physical record of her existence. In the overwhelmingly patriarchal world of that time, Blake was a survivor and I felt a strong connection to her. Today the vase sits together with other much loved objects on a sideboard, like an arrangement for a still life painting.



1 The vase, signed Kitty Blake.

2 Hand paintresses at work, c1900.

There is, also in my home, another object, not displayed like the vase but tucked away in a drawer, a secret from the world until, that is, I made it the focus of my Honour's project. The object is a box which contains letters written by me, to my mother, when I left home some forty years ago. The letters are full of white lies and half-truths about how well I was doing and how happy I was. They tell nothing of the difficulties I faced, the loneliness and the home-sickness that was almost crippling. To my mother, these letters, over the period of my absence, became the embodiment of the absent me and, as such, could never be destroyed. However, when I was recently given back the letters (and to that point I didn't know that they still existed), I immediately took a very bumpy magic carpet ride back forty years and could actually feel the loneliness and longing that had been excluded from their content. The box was returned to me in silence and received

in silence. Neither my mother nor I was willing to expose our emotions and speak about the personal significance of the box and its contents. The box had therefore, in that moment of exchange, acquired another layer of meaning - a meaning referential to the relationship that exists between my mother and myself.

In his treatise on *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai suggests that objects, such as those that adorn our homes and lie in drawers, acquire specific biographies as they move from place to place and hand to hand (Appadurai 1986: 9-15). We can never know their specific history and this will always be subject to speculation. Susan Stewart suggests that, although we may determine many things through archaeology and written history, “the experience of the object lies outside of the body’s experience... it is saturated with meanings that will never be revealed to us” (Stewart 1984: 136).

Rebecca Solnit talks of objects as having several different layers of meaning (Solnit 1998: 113). The most obvious layers add material readings, histories and value to the object. What is it made of, is it ecologically sound? By whom and how was it produced? Is it desirable, collectable or useful? The level of meaning about which I am most concerned is both intrinsic and transcendent. For example, I am interested in the object when it has stopped being read just for itself, and has become symbolic of something outside of itself. As an illustration, Solnit relates a story told by Gustave Flaubert to the Goncourt brothers one cold wintry evening in Paris. Flaubert had had a passionate love affair in a warm Mediterranean port city. The affair ended and the woman disappeared from Flaubert’s life. Determined to find her, he returned several times to the city, only

eventually to find that the house of the woman in question had been transformed into two shops and what had once been the bedroom was now a hairdresser's salon:

He went up and had himself shaved and recognised the wallpaper of the bedroom. It's a story of degrading diminishment - what had begun as a passionate encounter ended as a shave by a paid stranger, what began as a beautiful lover ended as wallpaper. But it is also a story of miraculous transubstantiation. The wallpaper had become an aide-mémoire and a means of confirming and recovering moments, passions, lives and even the story of the wallpaper became something transporting, something that removed not merely the teller but even the listeners from a cold Parisienne evening by the fire to a southern port redolent in the irrecoverable past (Solnit 1998: 113).

For Flaubert the wallpaper was no longer a commodity, an object about manufacture, working conditions and aesthetics; he recognised it and through his recognition, recovered something of what had once happened.

In writing about the souvenir, Susan Stewart also refers to an object as serving as a trace of an event that has gone. The object as souvenir; a pressed flower from a wedding bouquet, for example, begins to dematerialise and to reference the event and its narrative, to move from the material to the experiential (Stewart 1984: 138). In addition to these levels of meaning Solnit describes objects as seeming like witnesses,

silent unjudging, obdurate witnesses to the lives that go on in front of them and it is for this reason that myths, and fairytales have trees, stones, pictures that talk...the world of objects seems to have been holding out on us fabulous and terrible histories we can only imagine (Solnit 1998: 118).

To start my Master's project and to broaden the collection of objects about which I wished to make art, I asked my friends to name and describe the significance of objects that had personal and special meaning for them. The response yielded objects that had connections to people, (particularly to mothers and grandmothers), to events, grief, absence and loss. Difficult childhoods were remembered through material remnants; the past, in all of the stories, was constructed like a collage, of surviving relics. Pictures of the objects, together with their narratives, are included in an attached booklet.

More than one of the stories alluded to the experiences of women and children in the domestic sphere as being far from secure, happy and nurturing. For example Joan, an adopted child, tells of feeling utterly unable, in both appearance and manner to meet the expectations of her adoptive mother. However, she holds onto a small broken china ornament, the catastrophic breaking of which was significant in a change, for the better, in their relationship. Antonia holds onto a watch and talks of the contrast between the chaos of her mother's life and the ordered world of her grandparents with whom she spent a good deal of her growing-up years. Poignantly, she concludes, "chaotic it may have been but I always wanted to be with her." Tim's silver teapot so contaminated by deceit, is a symbol of lost love and an unhappy marriage and, finally, Christine's piece of linoleum reminds her that her mother's life, coping with eight children in a small terraced house, was one of hard labour. Objects were both witness to, and the reminders of, the events that took place in these homes and it was from this point that my project was to focus on women's experiences within the domestic

sphere and, in particular, those which are normally hidden from public view; those “terrible histories”, to which Solnit refers.

Housework has been a permanent fixture in the lives of most women for centuries. Whether they do the work themselves or employ other women to do the work for them, the tasks of cooking, cleaning and dealing with children’s needs have been and still are, constituted as women’s work<sup>11</sup>. Historically, these duties have been deemed of secondary importance to those tasks that create the wealth, cultural and spiritual well-being of society - tasks traditionally assigned to men. As a consequence, the domestic scene until the late nineteenth century, was not regarded as an arena worthy of art. A notable exception was 17<sup>th</sup> century Holland, where still life paintings served as visual sermons on the dangers of worldly seduction, and domestic genre painting highlighted the perils of a household losing its moral grip. Artists of this era used domestic objects and settings as vehicles for higher symbolic meanings and as props in morality lessons. There was a subtext, easily read and designed to keep a nation awash with the spoils of trade and empire building, spiritually and morally intact. The health of a nation, it read, rested on the shoulders of its virtuous and domestically compliant women. For many, however, and it is still true today, the health of the woman was, and is, seriously threatened by her experiences within the home. It has been my intent therefore, to make work that subverts the notion of the domestic as a nurturing and protective place. To find the means and the knowledge to do this, I began by critically examining the tradition of the still life



and domestic genre painting which presented an image of domestic life and feminine virtue as fundamental to society.

## Chapter Two

### Art and the Domestic Object

*Words and images that glorify the common place will tame the bluster of history*  
(Burgess 1982: 271)

#### Introduction

The intention of this chapter is to investigate how domestic objects were used as ideologically loaded cultural signifiers in Western art, prior to the twentieth century. In particular, it discusses how domestic objects were employed as allegories of feminine virtue to symbolise the home as a place in which women had no other needs or desires than to care for the demands of a husband and family.

The picturing of food and the artefacts associated with its preparation for consumption appear to have been an occupation of, and a comfort to, humankind for millennia. However, despite their centrality in our lives, the depiction of domestic objects has not been accorded a high status in Western art. As a category in painting production, the still life was positioned well below narrative scenes based on the Bible, literature and mythology, portraiture and landscape. As far back as the second and third centuries B.C., the Greeks referred to pictures that depicted things concerning history-making activities, such as legends of the gods, and the battles of heroes as *megalography*. In artistic terms they have been referred to as “grand illusions” (Schama 2004: 123). *Megalography*, contrasted with *rhoprography* “little illusions”, the depiction of those things from the domestic sphere that concerned the daily routine of life.

Norman Bryson, in his exploration of gender and the still life, argues that domestic objects and domestic life have been seen to represent the lowest level of material life, being regarded as products of the non-cultural nature of the human creature. Similarly, those who are primarily responsible for domestic chores -namely women – have been considered more closely associated with nature rather than culture. Bryson goes on to argue, that still life, which takes its subject matter from the domestic domain, “expresses the suppression and confinement of those outside the charmed circle of history and greatness” (Bryson 2001: 156). He writes that because all people have to eat, even the great, still life offers a humbling effect and a levelling of humanity (Bryson 2001: 61).

Because of a confluence of circumstances, still life was a genre that reached its peak in Holland in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. For the Dutch, it was a time of exceptional mercantile wealth, and simple table arrangements gradually gave way to displays of luxury goods. Bryson notes that in this strictly Calvinist society where seductions of the eye were condemned as a form of idolatrous worship, the role of the still life was to act as a kind of moral compass and preach a visual sermon on the evils of decadence and moral decay (Bryson 2000: 112).

Still life painting traded a balance between the worldly and the spiritual with the *vanitas* (Ecclesiastics 1: 2)<sup>iii</sup> tradition in particular, reminding society of the transience of material existence. In exquisitely rendered still life arrangements, exotic flowers and fruit (that only the rich could afford), were used as metaphors resonant with meaning, as exemplified by the lily, rose and iris which connoted

Mary and the Annunciation. Exotics, such as dahlias from Mexico, and fritillaries from Persia, were symbolic of morality and mortality, appearing as allegories of vanity and the cycle of human life, birth, blossom, death and decay (Bryson 2001: 105). The artist might also add worms, or the housefly, as signifiers of corruption and as a reminder of the destiny of human flesh. The apple symbolised temptation and the fall, the pear redemption (Davenport 1999: 56) and a glass of liqueur was a sign of worldly pleasures soon to pass away (Chadwick 1996: 37). Other symbols included butterflies and the dragonfly as emblems of human ephemerality (Bryson 2001: 107).



3 Harmen Steenwyck, *Still life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life* c.1640, National Gallery, London.

In Steenwyck's painting (see fig 3) the skull, watch and extinguished oil lamp identify the picture as a *vanitas*. The books in such still lives represent knowledge, musical instruments symbolise pleasure, the sword indicates power

and the shell, wealth (Ruger 2001: 28). Such paintings were a reminder to use one's time well, and a signal that a diligent and active life on earth would stand one in good stead on judgement day.

Domestic objects as allegories for Christian virtues also figured prominently in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch genre paintings which showed incidents of contemporary life, usually set within the home. The Dutch believed that at the heart of society was the home. The virtues of cleanliness, godliness, order and a modest lifestyle were highly prized. Affluence could be justified only if domestic virtue kept pace with prosperity. In visual representation, gleaming surfaces and musical instruments expressed domestic harmony. The mistress of the house or female servants were often engaged in needlework (mending, repairing, lace making and embroidering). The association of sewing and lace-making with feminine virtue was very strong in Dutch society and lace-making was introduced to re-educate wayward girls and orphans in domestic virtues, the argument being that busy hands would keep the mind focused (Chadwick1996: 129)<sup>iv</sup>.



4 Johannes Vermeer, *The Lace-maker* 1665-68, Musée de Louvre, Paris.

In Johannes Vermeer's (1632 – 1675) small and quiet observations of Dutch life, well-fed servants pour milk, their mistresses write and receive letters, play musical instruments, sew and sometimes entertain men, always under the strict moral code governing such entertainments. Vermeer's women are quietly unassertive; their manner suggests an inner peace, which reinforces the notion that domesticity was a highly desirable occupation, if you were a woman.

Vermeer's women are totally comfortable in their domestic space. His men, however, are dressed for the world outside and appear to be only visitors to the domestic arena (Bryson 2001: 159). Most often, the men are merely alluded to in maps on the wall or through letters presumably from far-away places where they



are busy trading and colonising. In a work by Jan Steen, *The Disorderly Household*, we are given an example of what happens to a household when moral decay sets in. Not only are the occupants drunk and disorderly but, through the representation of objects, Steen describes a nightmare. Playing cards, a collapsed house of cards perhaps, litter the floor alongside oyster shells, cheese and other food scraps. Children are stealing from their drunken mother's purse and a tub of dirty linen is balanced precariously on a shelf. Artists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch School painted allegories of vice and virtue, abstention and pleasure, and these depictions suggested a social ordering based on a gendered division of labour (Perry1999: 154).



5 Jan Steen ( 1626-1679) *The Disorderly Household*, Apsley House, London.

It is with some irony that art historians Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock point out that many of the most noted still life and genre artists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were, in fact, women, the subject matter being deemed entirely suitable for, and not likely to impinge upon, the femininity and modesty of female artists (Parker and Pollock 1981: 54). By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the popularity of still life painting declined amongst professional artists, becoming primarily the preserve of amateur middle class women for whom it was considered a genteel accomplishment and a fit subject for those women who were not meant to take their artistic life seriously. The medium of preference was watercolour, the paint being neither smelly nor messy, nor in any way unfeminine (Greer 1980:169).

One of the few male professional artists to continue to work in this genre was the French artist Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699 -1779) who expressed the same virtues, for the French bourgeoisie, as those of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch painters. Bryson describes Chardin as being an observer rather than a participant in domestic life, making clear the fact that, in the Chardin household, the women did the household chores and the men painted (Bryson 2001: 169).





6 Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Young Schoolmistress*, probably 1735-6, National Gallery, London.

The young girl whom the artist has depicted is probably about twelve or thirteen years old and, with a knitting needle, is pointing to a page of work to which she is trying to draw her young charge's attention. The girl seems distracted. There is a suggestion of impatience and melancholy, of the need to do one's duty rather than follow one's pleasure. The needle pointer suggests to us that when she is not having to oversee the boy's early education, she is probably engaged in learning domestic skills at the expense of an academic education (Parker 1984: 131). Such ideas about women's roles were popularised in the novels of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712-78. Rousseau, a philosopher and novelist, on writing of the 'virtuous woman' declared, 'her dignity is unknown; her glory lies in the esteem of her husband, her pleasures in the happiness of her family' (Perry 1999: 125).

Similarly in England, America and Australia the rigid code of sexual morality which placed women in the domestic sphere as keepers of moral purity, was embodied in the saying “The Angel in the House.”<sup>v</sup> To enforce the image, domestic objects were used many times in paintings as props in narratives about morality and the perils of a fall from grace. For example, A.L. Egg’s *Past Present and Future* is packed with symbolic details. A woman is prostrate on the floor, a bracelet coiled around her wrist like a serpent. On the table is an apple, which has been cut to reveal a rotten core. Children have been playing with cards and the house they have been building has collapsed. The father and husband holds a letter in his hand, proof perhaps of her adultery? The work is one of three and the poor woman eventually ends up as a prostitute and destitute on the streets. The use of objects, such as the apple, the ‘serpent’ bracelet and the playing cards tells us clearly that it is the woman who has failed in her duty as a wife and mother. The references to Eve’s fall from grace and expulsion from paradise leave us in no doubt (Perry 1999: 154). Perry asks the question, “If domestic life was such a joy to women, why would she be tempted away? The pernicious effects of French fiction were not adequate to explain this flaw in Victorian ideology” (Perry 1999: 167).



7 A.L. Egg, *Past, Present and Future*, 1858, Tate Gallery, London.

As can be seen from the above discussion the still-life genre has, over the course of several centuries, played handmaiden to patriarchal ideologies concerning the roles of women. From the moment in ancient times that it was considered to be *rhopography*, the depiction of those things which lack importance, the still life was set on a parallel ideological journey alongside femininity and domesticity which also, in cultural history, was given little importance. Hence, for centuries, it was considered a lower form of expression and subordinate to other genres such as history painting (Bryson 2001: 175). This however, was to change during the twentieth century when the still life tradition was subject to far-reaching transformations. These will be the subject of the following chapter.

## **Chapter Three: Context**

### **Still Life and Real life**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses how the still life tradition has been re-worked and re-interpreted during the course of the twentieth century. Part One focuses on two aspects of the still life tradition as it evolved during the twentieth century which are crucial to my own work .

The first is the incorporation into art of fragments and materials from the real world by artists such as Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948) and Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). The second is the stripping away of the ideological codes of meaning and moral allegories invested in domestic objects of previous centuries as exemplified by Giorgio Morandi's (1890 – 1964) re-interpretation of the still life tradition. Morandi's quiet paintings, as will be argued, present a façade of order, yet they imply something else more sinister. They are paintings that resemble family photographs, in which the smiling faces and quiet calm so often hide terrible truths.<sup>vi</sup> Part Two considers those contemporary artists whose work utilizes or references domestic objects to subvert the idea of home as a nurturing and protective environment, focusing in particular on works by Vivienne Binns, Judy Chicago, Faith Ringgold, Miriam Schapiro, Louise Bourgeois, Rachel Whiteread and Mona Hartoum.

## **Part One: Still life and Real life**

The incorporation of real objects and materials within still life predominated with the cubists, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris who were following Paul Cézanne's lead to find a new vision of reality. Not only did the artists break up the fixed form with broken lines and altered angles to reveal several views of the one object, they also collaged pieces of the real world, newspaper, wallpaper, and packaging, into their still lifes. The Cubist world, located in Paris, was a masculine world of cafes, bars, dominoes, chessboards, pipes, brown paint and crumpled newspaper, and their objects had little to do with the world of women. Nevertheless, Cubism's technical innovations, such as collage and constructed sculpture, created a new vision of reality and opened the way for artists to develop quite different relationships to the world of objects. The introduction of letters of the alphabet into their paintings and the printed word into their collages, together with the tactile surfaces of wallpaper and wood, represented the visible and tangible elements of reality - "things in themselves" (Walther 1998: 73).

Kurt Schwitters has been the main influence here, as far as my work is concerned. Using a collage technique that employed scraps of material of every description, gathered from a variety of sources, he developed a highly individual "world view", an anti-ideology he called Merz (Walther 1998: 124). It was an art that was trying to make sense of a world torn apart by the First World War and the looming Second. Schwitters tore and used scraps of discarded paper, the waste of a society driven by capitalism to a point of madness. Schwitters pushed his concept to the logical realisation of building a private world entirely from



everyday discarded pieces. *Merzbau* was a walk-in environment into which Schwitters increasingly retreated as a place of refuge. Schwitters wrote, in 1931, that he liked to “work, undisturbed, and left in peace in my studio or at my writing desk, unbothered by the noise of the street or having to think about food.” During this period Helma Schwitters, wrote that, “the family was in a miserable state...there was not enough money to keep his wife and son Ernst” (Meyer and Orchard 2000: 236). Poor Helma, from a solid middle-class background; what a struggle it must have been. Helma, I imagine, washed and folded many a tablecloth as she strove to maintain a home and the standards of her class, whilst looking after the domestic requirements of a driven artist. It is for this reason that I dedicate one of my works to her.



8 Kurt Schwitters, *Merz Picture 32A, (The Cherry Picture)* 1921, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Marcel Duchamp was also, at this time, using mundane and ordinary manufactured objects in an attempt to destabilise art. Any object, in a world full of objects, especially those devoid of any aesthetic interest such as household utensils, although common in real life, were new to art and brought “a certain virginity to the art experience” (Rowell 1997: 74). Duchamp’s ready-mades, a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool, a rack for drying bottles and the infamous urinal, when taken from their everyday context and re-contextualised in a new space, i.e., an art gallery, conveyed unnoticed properties and became available for carrying the mind of the spectator to other regions more verbal (Rowell 1997: 73). The Surrealists were immediately attracted to the unexpected effect and ontological weight of Duchamp’s objects, although they rejected his anti art stance (Rowell 1997: 86). Surrealism quickly invaded the world of art and the movement’s main artistic medium became known as the Surrealist Object. A central tenet of Surrealism was, “the chance encounter as the place of genesis of the ultimate poetic experience” (Rowell 1997: 139).

Andre Breton, Surrealism’s founder, talks of the “poetic consciousness of objects”, and he and others searched flea markets and junk stalls for the useless, the discarded and the displaced domestic object in which they might find hidden poetic qualities. Certain found objects were understood to be significant in that they corresponded, in some way, to a pre-existing desire or fantasy (Okun 1981: 181). Shopping was the new activity for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century middle class; goods from the world flooded into galleries and department stores and presented fertile ground for the Surrealist in search of the marvellous (*merveilleux*). Eroticism

and sexual desire were also central to Surrealist ideology and perhaps the most well known of the Surrealist objects, made by a woman, Meret Oppenheim, which consisted of an ordinary teacup, saucer and spoon covered with fur, is full of sexual connotation (Hughes 1996: 243). Contextually I find this work interesting, not for its famed qualities as a sexual fetish, but because the teacup has so frequently been used in traditional still life.<sup>vii</sup>



9 Meret Oppenheim *Object* 1936, fur covered cup, collection, the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

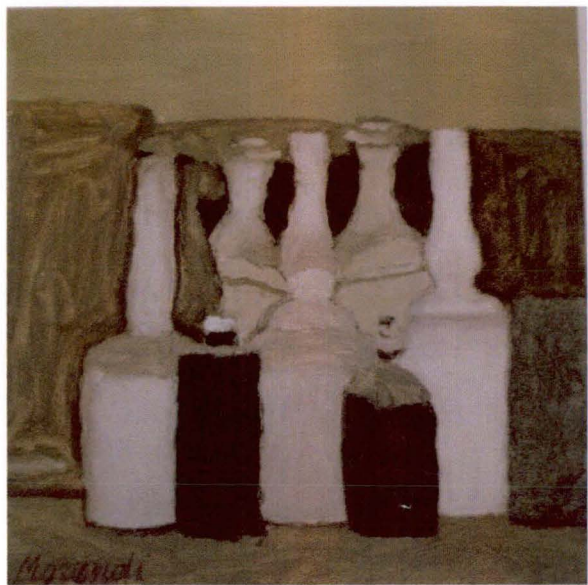
In their artistic repertoire the Surrealists included paintings which the writer Filippo de Pisis described as having metaphysical qualities. In 1918 de Pisis wrote that the surrealist style “....expands the barrier of the knowable immeasurably”, being based on the “direct vision of mystery, contained in the most common of insignificant objects” (Rowell 1997: 86). Giorgio Morandi, on the basis of his still life painting of 1918-19, was briefly associated with this tendency.



Morandi is well known for his isolationist lifestyle and repetitive paintings of the same mundane everyday domestic objects. At first glance, they appear to be the detritus of domesticity, a collection of things once in daily use but now discarded. It is not long, however, before one stops seeing them as specific objects and more as participants in family life. In some of his works they appear composed, as if ready for a group photograph.<sup>viii</sup> In others, Morandi's objects seem to be huddled together for safety. While retaining their individual identity, they surrender themselves to the comfort and security of being a group. There is an ambiguity about the space in which the objects sit, which strangely gives a feeling that they are waiting for an instruction to move. One can almost hear the photographer asking them to move a little to the left. Morandi's palette gives the vignettes a sense of silence and of muteness. The objects are not only taking part in small silent dramas of their own, but the pots and utensils appear as mute witnesses to other events being enacted outside of the frame.

Contextually, Morandi is important to my work for several reasons. First of all, the sense of muteness one gets from the images corresponds to my interest in the object being a silent witness to events in the home. Secondly, the objects themselves no longer serve the function for which they were made, but now operate as containers of memory and as carriers of new meaning. Norman Bryson writes that behind the still life there stands a culture of artefacts with their own independent history. Domestic utensils, with which the modern viewer is familiar, are direct lineal descendants of those used since ancient times (Bryson 2001: 137). In my view Morandi's objects, which stand so timelessly in an

enigmatic space, offer a direct link to that past. Morandi's use of domestic objects to suggest something disturbing has been taken much further in the work of a number of contemporary artists,<sup>ix</sup> the subject of Part Two of this chapter.



10 Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life*, 1962, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Edinburgh.

## **Part Two**

I address here works by Donna Marcus, Vivienne Binns, Helen Fuller, Judy Chicago, Faith Ringgold, Miriam Schapiro, Louis Bourgeois, Rachel Whiteread and Mona Hartoum. They have influenced the course of my research in that they have utilised or referenced domestic objects to subvert the idea of home as a nurturing and protective environment in order to give voice to women's experiences within the home.

The first artist that I researched for context material was sculptor Donna Marcus, a mid career Australian artist and well known for her practice of utilizing mundane everyday domestic objects. Marcus scavenges her materials, particularly old aluminium, from second hand shops, which although bright and optimistic on the surface, when close up reveal the scratches that betray histories of use and the sad final destination of the opportunity shop. These objects, amongst them, saucepan lids, teapots and steamers are transformed into futuristic forms and hybrid creatures that manage to maintain nostalgic memory and familiarity. Consequently the sculptures appeal to a broad audience, being both humble and profound. These objects never hide their origins. For instance, a snake assembled from aluminium teapots, though rhythmic in pattern and form as it climbs the gallery wall, continues to appear as an endless series of containers for domestic fluids taking the viewer on narrative journeys formed through their own experiences, of domestic relationships and the rituals of tea making and tea drinking.

Marcus has been included in several National Sculptural exhibitions and also commissioned to create public artwork. In 2006, 15 geodesic spheres, created from 7,000 aluminium vegetable steamer pieces welded together, ranging in size from 1.3m. to 2m. were installed in Brisbane city. The futuristic forms and the aesthetics of repetition and patterning sit comfortably as a public artwork in the thriving city of Brisbane. Nevertheless Marcus still manages to invoke the contemporary practices of recycling, and recall the multiple domestic kitchens in which the steamers first started life.

Marcus in recent years has included vitreous porcelain in her repertoire, a material that like aluminium is domestic in function and aesthetic. Vitreous porcelain makes an ironic reference to Duchamp's first 'readymade' and more generally to the aesthetics of the bathroom. In an uncanny confluence of form and material, Marcus' sculpture *Ascorbic* is the humble lemon squeezer enlarged and duplicated in vitreous porcelain. The original object is, once again, easily recognised. However, the material from which the sculpture is made brings together two areas of the house normally kept part, the kitchen and the bathroom. All of Marcus' public works, including those that extend beyond Australia - i.e. the Kaust Art programme in Saudi Arabia, are forms developed from the humble domestic object found in kitchens throughout the world and it is this aspect of her work that I find contextually important for my work. Material and form offer the viewer a range of narratives with which to connect. *Delphinus*, for example, made for the Kaust programme is a series of large and small sculptures that guide pedestrians through a walkway of the King Abdullah University. Distribution of

the individual pieces follows the layout of the Delphinus constellation documented by the astronomer As-Sufi 1000yrs ago. *Delphinus* is informed by science, astronomy, and philosophy. It looks to the past, both recent and ancient, is organic in appearance and industrial in manufacture, thereby presenting the viewer with a range of narratives with which to connect. Marcus' use of the easily recognised lemon squeezer, however, also brings the viewer back to his/her domestic life and the universal human condition. It was this last point that influenced my decision to shift to three-dimensional work and to incorporate specific references to the home, by using material such as household furniture, windows - suggestive of suburban streets – and domestic glassware. It was to other artists that I gathered ideas regarding process, such as the traditional 'feminine' crafts, as a way of also conveying meaning, the first of these being Vivienne Binns.



11 Donna Marcus, *Delphinus*, 2009, Kaust Art Program, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Vivienne Binns was a founding member of the Australian Women's Art Movement in Sydney and, during the 1970s, helped establish the practice of artist-in community (Binns 1991: 147). Binns' work *Mothers' Memories, Others' Memories* was a major project of the period between 1979 and 1981. Through group co-operation the lives of women were recalled and their means of expression in the domestic sphere examined. Memories, family albums, artefacts and memorabilia were collected and presented in various forms and interpreted in a variety of ways. Needlework, knitting, crochet work, cookery, homecare and decoration, diaries and albums were revealed as important expressive media. All the material was drawn from the lives of the participants, or the lives of their mothers, aunts and grandmothers. The final exhibition certainly raised awareness of the creative talent that lay hidden in the average home. However, some critics suggested that the project was not searching enough, that it lacked "bite", and tended to romanticise the material. The reason for this was because many of the participants were forced to censor their work out of consideration for the feelings of the people whose lives were involved. One participant, Christine, writes,

"My family epitomised what can be wrong in the nuclear family with a madman let loose on a bunch of women"...there was *no way* I could put it in. Not only because my mother was going to see it but the rest of the family were too, and the painful memories would just have been too much" (Moore 1994: 74).

Christine's story is one that clearly highlights how fear and vulnerability are too often a feature of family life and how emotional damage stops terrible truths from being revealed. Although Binns' project presented an opportunity for



women to speak out, the prospect of being judged, assessed, analysed or being slotted into a theoretical framework was too much for the participants whose lives, until this point, had belonged to the private sphere.



12a and 12b *Mothers' Memories, Others' Memories*  
Community Participation Project, University of New South Wales and  
Blacktown 1979-81

Helen Fuller (b 1949) formerly known as Lillecrapp-Fuller, like Binns, lives and works in Australia and has a multi media practice. Unlike Binns however, Fuller is not driven by strong feminist ideology and prefers to describe her work as autobiographical and largely concerned with discovering the layered meanings associated with found domestic objects. Fuller's bowerbird instincts and habitual accumulation of found materials, many of which reference a childhood in the 50s, 'bare the clues to her placement of self' (Rainbird 1991: 8). Fuller has also stated that for her art is a journey and that 'her destination is a primitive self, connected and true' (Kean 2006: 19). Although Fuller's art can be viewed as introspective, and much of it tells of incidents related to her past, they are incidents to which many women can relate. For example in an exhibition entitled *A Visual Diary 1979-91* QUT, Brisbane, 1991, four assemblages *Untitled*

(Hinged Box), *Stuffing from a pillow*, *Black and White corsets* and *Enamel Plates* all dated 1979, include elements, such as dried food, newspaper and items of clothing that for Fuller refer to the trauma of domestic upheaval following the break up of her marriage. These works all carry items symbolic of sadness, fear of the future and of the artist's precarious existence at that time. The corsets carry a significant dimension of feminist thought – considerations of male /female relationships and role expectations are implied, and the addition of a palette knife and dried bread covered in paint suggests that it refers to Fuller's struggle to become an artist in spite of restraints placed upon her pursuit (Rainbird 1991: 5).

My particular interest in Fuller's work relates to her use of fabric. Inheriting skills from her older female relatives, Fuller refers to the stitching, repairing, and making of garments that was the pattern of daily life for her mother and grandmothers. This 'hands on' 'doing /making' attitude, which permeated her growing up, is expressed in paintings and mixed media work. In a recent article (*Artlink* vol 28 # 3, 2009) journalist Cath Kenneally details much of Fuller's output of the last ten years. One work detailed by Kenneally especially resonated with my concerns. *Penance* 2004 consists of a slatted wooden table through which bundles of cloth have been forced into the shape of a cross. The table stands on red bucket supports, below is a guilt edged mirror which reflects the flapping underside. Presented to the world is neatness, order and sacrifice. What is hidden is the tension and chaos (Kenneally 2009: 32). To me this work speaks of the hidden private domestic world so often entirely different to the



orderly one that is presented to the public. I see it also as referencing the constant putting aside, 'the sacrifice,' of dreams of a life beyond domestic rituals and although not stated, may once again refer to Fuller's early struggles to become an artist.

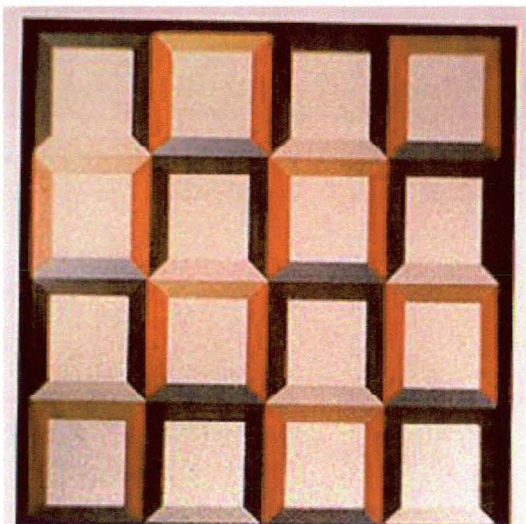


13 Helen Fuller, *Penance*, 2006 location unknown

Schapiro, Chicago, and Ringgold also referenced the domestic in their work. All three were prominent members of the American feminist art movement of the seventies which sought to question the role of women in western society; it did so by establishing a context in which art history could no longer ignore the processes, methods and the materials of female productivity (Chadwick 1996: 362). Their challenge also drew attention to the millions of women whose artistic lives had been subordinated to their primary role as wives and mothers,

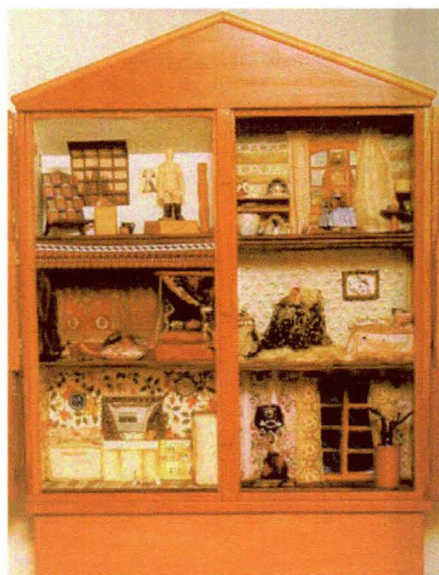
and to the consequent lack of confidence, frustration and feelings of entrapment that often ensued.

Shapiro had trained as a painter during the 40s and 50s in the male dominated New York school of modernism. At that time, prominent work featured hard-edged geometric compositions which referenced architectural forms. Decoration was dismissed as beneath the concerns of a serious artist. By the mid 60s Shapiro began to recognise that although these compositions reflected a 'masculine' tradition they also expressed women's experience of domestic architectural environments. Shapiro's painting *16 windows* (1965) has been described as the transitional work that led her towards feminism and to explore domestic architectural space as a site of political transformation (Reckett 2001: 56). The windows are blank and appear as a series of boxes suggesting entrapment.



14 Miriam Schapiro, *16 Windows* 1965, location unknown.

In the early seventies, Schapiro collaborated with Judy Chicago to transform a dilapidated old house in Los Angeles into *Womanhouse*. Each room in the house was used by different artists to visually express the identification of women with their domestic space. There was *The Nurturant Kitchen* whose pink walls were bedecked with eggs which became breasts, and *The Linen Closet* from which a woman emerged amidst the shelves and the sheets (Witzling 1992: 372). A three-dimensional dolls' house, was also made especially for the *Womanhouse* by Shapiro and Sherry Brody, in which the artists juxtaposed the perceived safety and comfort of the traditional home with danger and fear. These threats were expressed visually by placing a snake in the lounge-room, in the nursery a baby was in an alabaster egg and a monster was in the crib, while a large bear menaced at the window. In the studio the threat was perceived as the male nude model, a reference to art history. Shapiro's hand stitched model wears jack boots and has a semi-erect penis, symbols of male dominance and superiority. Shapiro's inference is I suggest, to the phallocentric ideas that, until challenged, drove art making and art history in Western culture. Shapiro says of the *Dollhouse*, that she wanted, "the paradox of being adult and playing house within a house, a box within a box, a child within the woman" (Broude and Garrard 1994 : 79).



15 *The Dollhouse*, mixed media, 1972

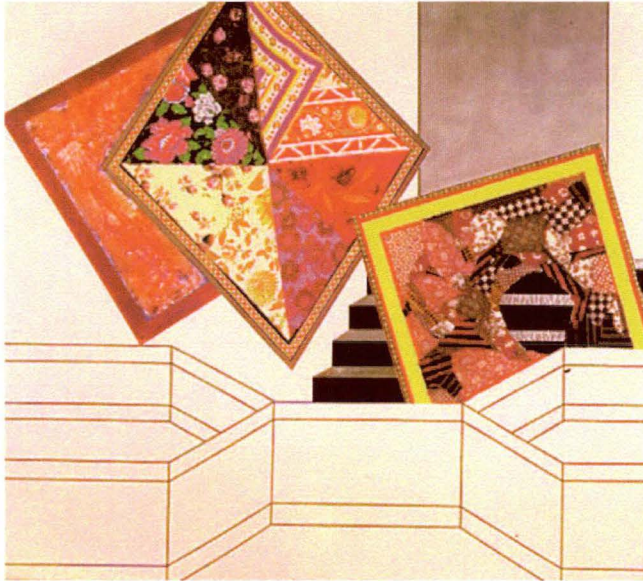


16 *The Linen Closet*, mixed media, 1972.

The project *Womanhouse* proved to be a steep learning curve for all participants and was fraught with tensions; nevertheless, it was a watershed in Schapiro's career. From this point instead of trying to express herself in a language largely defined by a masculine art world, she sought inspiration for her work in the traditional feminine experience of working with fabric and began combining fabric collage and acrylic painting in abstract paintings which she called *femmes*. Schapiro defined the term as a word invented to include traditional women's techniques such as sewing (all forms), creating scrap books, cooking etc; activities also engaged in by men but assigned in history to women (Chadwick 1996: 364). Writing about the significance of her *femmes* in 1977, Schapiro explained, "I wanted to validate the traditional activities of women, to connect myself to the unknown women who made quilts, who had done the invisible women's work of civilisation..." (Broude and Garrard 1994: 208). In



works such as *Lady Gengi's Maze*, swatches of patterned fabric burst from the bonds of the linear modernist grids and geometries that can no longer either physically or symbolically contain them. As an artist Schapiro had broken free from the masculine art world, a breakthrough that resulted in a mainstream Pattern and Decoration movement practised by both men and women.



17 Miriam Shapiro, *Lady Gengi's Maze*, 1972. Collection the artist.

Despite personal disappointments resulting from tensions between the participants of the *Womanhouse* project, Chicago, was to draw inspiration from its collaborative aspects. In her research for the *Dinner Party*, Chicago discovered that many china painters had gone to art school when young and had only fallen into the hobby of painting china when looking for a way to express themselves that did not require a choice between family life and their art. Chicago writes, “The china painting world and the household objects that they painted seemed to be a perfect metaphor for women’s domesticated and

trivialised circumstances. It was an excruciating experience to watch enormously gifted women squander their creative talents on tea-cups” (Stiles and Selz 1995: 359). *The Dinner Party* slowly evolved from Chicago having seen, during her china painting experience, a dinner set that had taken the artist three years to paint. Chicago began to think about using the set, with napkins and silverware, for a reinterpretation of *The Last Supper* (of biblical fame); the guests would be women of historical or mythological fame, ranging from the *Primordial Goddess* to the American artist Georgia O’Keeffe. The representation in the form of plates set on the table would express the way women have been confined, and the piece would thus reflect both women’s achievements and their oppression (Stiles and Selz 1995: 360). *The Dinner Party* employed materials not used in the high art repertoire, but celebrated needlework and china painting, two crafts that had been devalued for being primarily of the women’s sphere. The work was realised by a team of women, although Chicago was its singular creator.

Contextually, I find it a very interesting work. *The Dinner Party* not only speaks of women’s subjective experiences but it also refers, in my view, to the tradition of the still life which was, almost always, a setting of objects on a table. The table, a central component of domestic activity and the routines of daily living, is also symbolic of the links to still life painting and of the journey that women and the still life have travelled together (Bryson 2001: 136).



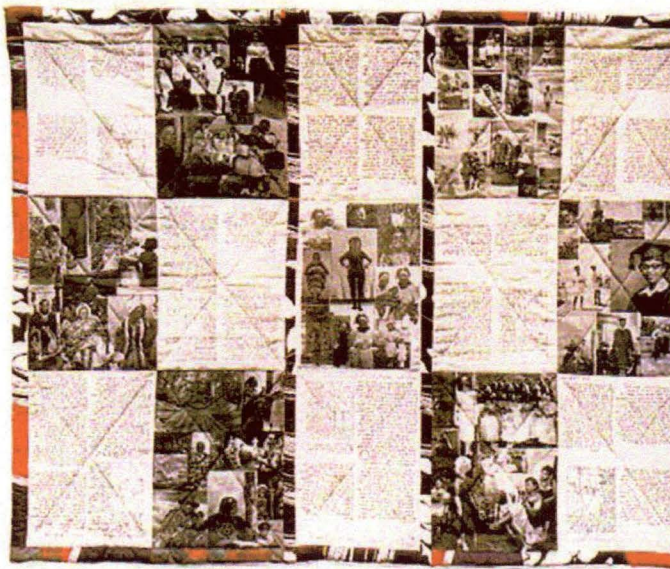
18 Judy Chicago “Georgia O’Keeffe”, place setting from *The Dinner Party*, 1979.

Other feminists of this era, including Faith Ringgold, a black American feminist, chose to honour the traditional skills of women by creating quilts into which they stitched contemporary, political and personal stories. Narratives embedded in the quilts articulate a point of view that is decidedly female (Witzling 1992: 354). Their narrative structure derives from a family history of story-telling which Ringgold has claimed as a major influence in her life. The stories often refer to slave histories and the experience of black women in a bigoted white society. Critics have called the nature of the quilts, and the stories they tell, subversive. However, Ringgold’s quilts allow black women to speak openly and with authority about their lives. Their stories are no longer expressed through the stereotypes of the dominant culture; Ringgold’s “heroines” speak about their

lives in their own voices. Perhaps the greatest significance of these story quilts is that they challenge the traditional separation of crafts and fine art. Since the nineteenth century women have used the quilt to express the truths about their lives, such as through the referential symbolic use of pattern. Fabrics were chosen for special meaning, or to mark significant events such as engagements and births etc (Witzling 1992: 354).

According to the critic Lucy Lippard, the quilt is a “prime visual metaphor for women’s lives, for women’s culture” whether sewn by many hands or by one pair of hands with many memories. For Lippard, the quilt embodied a material diary of women’s interrupted lives (Lippard 1983: 32-43). Thrift and pride in one’s work were essential components of being a good housekeeper so, often, the materials were saved and recycled scraps. Stitched into quilts are memories and stories. In addition, the art form was something that women were able to control as educators, as critics and as viewers (Mainardi 1973: 18-23).





19 Faith Ringgold, *Change: Faith Ringgold's over 100lbs Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt* 1986, private collection.

Ringgold once said, "I'm a woman and I'm soft", (Lippard 1976:260) as a justification for using soft materials. Thanks to these pioneering feminist artists, it is now more acceptable to use these materials and processes within fine arts practice.<sup>x</sup>

The artist, whose oeuvre is particularly relevant to my concerns with the construction of memory, and subjective domestic experience, is Louise Bourgeois (b1911). Bourgeois' early work, that is the work she produced as a painter in the 1950s, included *Femmes Maisons*, a series of female figures whose bodies consisted partly of a house. These referenced the social status of women and their allocation to domestic territory (Grosenick 2001: 60). However, since the 60s, Bourgeois has taken her domestic theme further and, with a range of sculptural materials, revisits childhood memories and never-healed wounds. Photographs of the Bourgeois family show them presided over by a smiling,

confident and elegant father. Yet there was a dark side to Louise Bourgeois' family life. Her father tormented and teased the family, humiliating Bourgeois into feeling ashamed that she was not the boy he always wanted (Greenberg & Jordan 2003: 15). Most of her unresolved anger, though, stemmed from the betrayal she felt when her father installed her governess as his mistress, a young woman just seven years older than Bourgeois. Bourgeois felt jealousy at having to compete for her father's attention, and rage at the mistress whom she had counted as a friend and dismayed by her mother's tacit approval of the situation. The household simmered with emotion. It was a home that had a public face of respectability and a private one of secrets and lies (Greenberg & Jordan 2003: 20). Bourgeois talks of wishing to get rid of the mistress by wringing her neck and has translated this violent physical act again and again into spiral forms and twisted shapes (Greenberg and Jordan 2003: 20).

Gaston Bachelard observes that the house of memories is psychologically charged and that "...over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us" (Bachelard 1994: 14). For Bourgeois, this could not be more accurate. The Bourgeois family repaired tapestries and their workshop in Paris was full of needles and thread. Therefore, to exorcise her painful childhood memories, it is to these materials that Bourgeois often turns, believing that the magic power of the needle will repair damage and claim forgiveness (Grosenick, 2001: 63). Bourgeois has also explored the claustrophobic, psychological and traumatic atmosphere of an unhappy home through the construction of cells from old doors, windows and wire mesh. The cells, though

large enough for people walk around, do not have doors and the viewer can only glimpse the interior through glass. Within the cells are objects such as clothing and furniture which are meditations on, and symbolic of, memory, history and time. The cells have also been linked to themes of entrapment, voyeurism and surveillance (Grosenick 2001: 65). Within the confines of *Cell (Choisy)* 1990-1993, is a precise scale model of the house in which Bourgeois spent childhood years. Looming over the cell is a large guillotine. Although the house was not the home in which the dreaded mistress was installed, Bourgeois explains that the piece is psychological and relates to how people destroy themselves within the family (Morris 2007: 73).

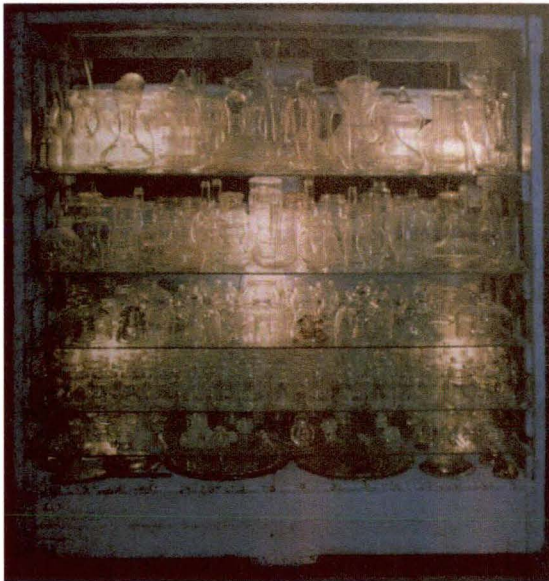


20 Louise Bourgeois, *Cell Choisy*, 1990- 1993, Ydesaa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto

Another basic material in Bourgeois' oeuvre is glass, and I have been particularly influenced by her work *Le Defi (The Challenge)* an assembly of glass objects, all



domestic, held within a cabinet of rough wood, painted blue. The vessels, now empty and functionless, are the tools of housekeeping, and provide a sort of lost narrative to Bourgeois' early *Femmes Maison* paintings. The various shapes and sizes represent for Bourgeois, the classification of memories. The transparency evokes not only clarity but also the fragility of truth and confidence (Bernadac 2006: 138). For Bourgeois, they also symbolise the constant risk of damage and destruction. Bourgeois' title *The Challenge* refers to the process of stacking glass without breakage, overcoming the desire to smash everything. This is a desire, born in my view, of anger and frustration, emotions that frequently overwhelm women who feel trapped by their domestic circumstance.



21 Louise Bourgeois, *Le Defi (the Challenge)* 1991 Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Rachel Whiteread is another artist whose work has influenced my own.

Whiteread (born 1963), like Morandi, uses commonplace and everyday objects.

Just as Morandi's jugs stand for all jugs, Whiteread's objects, for example her

cast of a London Terrace, stand for the lives of all working class Londoners (Coldwell 2006: 40). This work was monumental. Whiteread poured concrete into the house, and once it had set, removed the exterior walls. The private interior was now exposed, and the notion of the security of “one’s own four walls” was subverted, as was the comforting idea of “my home is my castle” (Grosenick 2001: 553). Whiteread exposes the interior of a home with all the scars of the lives lived within it. It is, however, Whiteread’s 2007 installation of 16 dolls’ houses, titled *The Village*, that best expresses the notion that all is not nurture and safety behind closed suburban doors.



22 Rachel Whiteread *The Village* (16 spaces)

The dolls’ houses in Whiteread’s work are all second-hand; they’ve been loved but neglected and in her words, “they have a smell of the past .....they evoke so much emotion in people. They are quite sinister” (*The Independent* 2007: 2-3). *The Village* was installed in Naples, Italy, in early 2007. The houses are

arranged within the museum in ordered rows, like suburban estates. “I was brought up in Ilford, and I find the suburban thing creepy”, she says. “It’s like *Desperate Housewives*. Everyone seems happy and friendly, but behind closed doors there are weird things going on.”(*The Independent* 2007: 2-3). Naples was the first installation of *The Village* but in a recent exhibition in Boston<sup>xi</sup> the village grew to include many more houses.

Finally, Mona Hartoum is another artist who adapts furniture and household objects, transforming them from objects of comfort and support to objects of hostility and aggression. Hartoum, Lebanese born (1952) of Palestinian parents is now a resident of Britain and remains deeply affected by the plight of the Palestinian people. As a consequence, much of her work addresses the loss of home, and the vulnerability of the individual in relation to the violence inherent in institutional power structures. Her primary point of reference is the human body and many of the objects she transforms are those objects with which the body interacts. *Wheelchair*, for example, is made entirely of metal so surfaces that are normally soft and yielding are made of steel; cold and rigid. In *incomunicado*, a child’s cot resembles a prison cell, and the springs have been replaced with taut cheese wire. The sculptures evoke themes of child abuse as well as the suffering of political prisoners (Grosenick 2001: 186). The title of the latter suggests a metaphor for the plight of those incarcerated and tortured in places where their voices cannot be heard. Other adaptations by Hartoum include a giant egg slice and a vegetable slicer which again suggest instruments of torture. These are everyday items that normally serve our well being, and



which we usually associate with homeliness and protection. Perhaps the most poignant work, in view of her past experience and political interest is *Homebound*, 2000 which was installed at Tate Britain and also shown at 'Documenta 11' in Kassel, Germany. It is an installation of furniture and illuminated kitchen utensils connected by a lethal electric cord and screened off from the viewer by a set of horizontal lines of taut wire, creating the effect of a domestic world behind bars. A prison for some, unreachable by others, and far from a domestic idyll (Cantz 2004: 21).



23 Mona Hartoum, *Homebound*, 2000

While the political themes of Hartoum's work are beyond the scope of my work, themes such as child abuse occurring within the home are relevant. Hartoum's adaptation of ordinary everyday domestic items have a very disturbing and psychological impact. It makes the crime and exploitation of children seem so much the greater. In addition Hartoum's kitchen tableau touches on the

traditional female role and gender issues surrounding the struggle that women have to reconcile their private and public lives.



## **Conclusion to Context**

The artists who have been the focus of this chapter, namely Marcus, Binns, Fuller, Chicago, Ringgold, Schapiro, Bourgeois, Whiteread and Hartoum have subverted the notion of the home (in Hartoum's case, home is a country) as a nurturing and protective environment. The common approach of these artists is that they utilise, or make reference to, domestic objects in their art practice.

They have also, I believe, worked within the umbrella term of still life, insofar as they create tableaux of domestic objects which represent human experience without the human figure. Like artists of traditional still life and genre painting, contemporary artists use objects loaded with symbolism to tell their stories. What differs, is that traditional still life and genre painting were the tools of a patriarchal society utilised to enforce moral codes and dictate social behaviour.

In the following chapter, I focus on an analysis of my own work to demonstrate how it seeks to subvert the traditional meanings associated with domestic objects.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Studio Practice**

#### **Introduction**

The intention of this chapter is to delineate the formal and conceptual decisions made and the technical strategies employed during studio-based research. As contemporary still life, my work addresses the intimate connections between the inanimate and the animate and considers how objects participate in our experience of life and memory. In particular, my work considers how simple domestic objects can act as condensers of memory and as mute witnesses to the experiences of women within the home. The outcome is an exhibition of mixed media objects that contain the major discourse of the project.

Each work submitted for examination has substantive parts that have been sourced from refuse centres, or scavenged from the street. It was an intentional strategy to use source material that already held memory. The found object is one of the basic aesthetic pre-occupations of twentieth century art. As noted in Chapter Three, the Surrealist found object was rooted in Freudian psychology, whilst the *merz* works of Kurt Schwitters engaged in the everyday in order to express the concept that art and life are intertwined. I use the found object to evoke memory and to engender a chain of associations. I am asking the viewer to engage in former connections and also to seek new streams of meaning through the use of materials and process.

Associate Professor of Art History, Martha Buskirk, in the 'Contingent Object of Contemporary Art' suggests in today's art world, the term 'medium' is stretched

to breaking point, as it can encompass an extremely broad range of materials as well as consisting of nothing more tangible than a linguistic declaration or an ephemeral action. Artists now work across a range of different media according to the subject matter and choose any material that is most appropriate. In his essay titled 'Material as Language in Contemporary Art', Christian Scheidemann cites the potato as a good example of how one object can be used as a vehicle for entirely different ideas and stories and presents examples of contemporary artists who have used the potato to represent historical, cultural and existential values. (Scheidemann 2004: 78).

With this understanding of the term 'medium', I moved away from rendering objects in paint, as I had for the booklet *Silent Witnesses* and instead began to work with and to build three-dimensional works using actual objects. As already outlined in the Introduction, my choice of glass, paper and the found object was deliberate in order to symbolise fragility, vulnerability and memory. In addition to these symbolic and metaphoric meanings, objects have a material presence and it is this material presence that carries extra emotional weight. These objects, found scraps of paper, drawers, glassware etc., bear all the scars associated with the nostalgia of past associations and it is this materiality that enables the viewer to make connections with the *essence* of the object and to invoke his or her lost or forgotten world of subjective experience.

For a three-dimensional object, space is an important element in communicating meaning, and inviting an embodied engagement, which Claire Bishop describes as 'immersive', 'theatrical' or 'experiential' (Bishop 2005: 6). Space is

particularly significant in three of my works - *Loaded*, *Keep it in the Family* and *Homage to Helma*. *Loaded* is built with delicately balanced glass and is theatrical in appearance. The space around the installation enables small groups to gather, circumnavigate, point to objects and share experiences. Conversely *Keep it in the Family* which sits in an opposite corner, cannot be circumnavigated and is under subdued lighting. Its position and lighting enhance the feeling of privacy and exclusion and the use of everyday objects connects viewers to their domestic lives. Spread on a pedestal in the middle of the gallery, under a spotlight, is *Homage to Helma* – a tablecloth made entirely of scraps of paper. This work also needs to be seen from all sides so that each scrap can be viewed for its own sake as well as being part of a whole. By placing it on a table rather than on the wall, its domestic associations are heightened and it invites a closer, more intimate connection with the viewer than the more distanced spectatorship which occurs with works displayed on the wall.

All the works have the colour red included within them. This refers directly to Louise Bourgeois' statement that:

Red is the colour of blood  
Red is the colour of paint  
Red is the colour of violence  
Red is the colour danger  
Red is the colour of shame  
Red is the colour jealousy  
Red is the colour of grudges  
Red is the colour of blame  
(Centro Cultural de Belem 1998: 40)

Blood, violence, danger, shame, jealousy, grudges and blame are all words that describe the experience that some women encounter within the domestic sphere.

## Specific Works

### *Silent Witnesses*

Small booklet of 80pages (included with the exegesis) produced on an Apple Mac. The text was formatted using In-Design software and the pictures scanned, using Adobe Photo Shop.

The source material for this work began with a small vase that fits into the palm of my hand, and which has been a part of my domestic environment for many years. It has crossed the world with me and witnessed many and varied domestic events. The reason why I choose to keep it, while other more valuable items have been discarded, says a lot about who I am; the vase, therefore, carries enormous ontological weight. The vase is mute, yet traces of its history exist in the signature of its paintress. The smell of a Northern Hemisphere autumn exudes from its decoration, done with such dexterity and skill that it brings back childhood memories for me and suggests that the paintress also loved those misty days of mellow fruitfulness. I thought long and hard in conceptual and representational terms about the significance of this vase and how I might collect other objects that hold latent secrets, hinting only at an infinity of untold narratives. As I outlined in Chapter One, cherished objects hold deeply personal associations and meanings, and have often played important roles in events and relationships. Their role as mute witnesses to the experiences of women within the home made them a logical place to start my investigation. Domestic objects have also been central to traditional still life and genre painting in which they held symbolic meanings that were often instrumental in maintaining gender discrimination.

I began searching for source material amongst my friends and was shown the real thing or given photographs of many objects that were indeed containers of memory. Individually and collectively they stood as metaphors for life; birth, childhood, adult life with all its ups and downs, death and remembrance, and a few hinted at the vulnerability, disillusion, lack of fulfilment and frustration that the domestic experience imposes on some women, experiences which I had determined to be the core concept of the project.

I set myself the task of recording each object with a sketch of charcoal and oil paint on small cotton duck canvases. The muted tones of a mixture of Payne's grey, white and yellow ochre intentionally removed the visual personality of the objects. It was my intention for them to appear mute and to enhance their properties as silent witnesses. However, it soon became clear that the narratives that accompanied each object enhanced the communicative potential of the objects and I began researching ways of presenting the text. I studied contemporary artists who have included text within their work including those by Annette Messenger, Hanne Darboven, Susan Hiller and Dr. Brigita Ozolins and it was in the course of this reading that I discovered that The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney had held, in 1998, an exhibition entitled *Personal Effects/ The Collective Unconscious*. The exhibition considered the symbolic function of objects. Accompanying the exhibition was a small anthology that encouraged the viewer and readers to consider the relationship of art to lived experience, both personal and shared (McDonald, 1998). I realised that I had

enough material for a small book and researched how this might be done as an inexpensive desk top publication.

The resultant book was a useful starting point for my project but I felt that in order to re-work the tradition of the still life genre and address contemporary concerns relating to women within the home, I needed to work more broadly and with different media. I began to work on objects that were directly symbolic of women's experience, specifically of their labour and entrapment.

### ***Secrets and Lies***

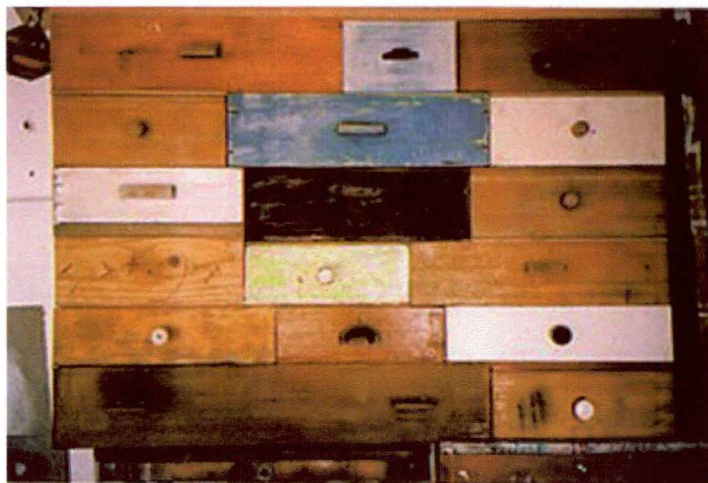
Wooden drawer fronts mounted on mdf.  
2.7 m. high x 3.6m.wide x 15mm

This work developed directly from the stories I had collected. So many objects seemed to have been tucked away in drawers so that as well a repositories of valued things, drawers can be symbolic of entrapment. They also stand as a metaphor for those things that cannot be reached. The drawers, in this work, defy their purpose as they cannot be opened. The curious may approach and try but the drawers will not reveal their secrets, they continue to stand watchful and silent. The large scale of this piece also expresses the huge impact that secrets and lies have on family relationships.

Collected over several months from a variety of sources, the drawers appear virtually as found. It was important that all the marks of time and history remained intact. The traces of past lives were so evident in the marks left behind

by missing doorknobs, scratches and peeling paint. They signify the stories imbued in objects and like the stories within the book, encourage the viewer to consider the relationship between art and lived experience. To fit the drawers together was not technically difficult but as some of the screws to the door knobs protruded too much to get a flat surface, these were removed. Some needed to be trimmed in order to fit more closely and gaps were filled with small pieces of wood. Initially, I had envisaged that each drawer would be mounted on the gallery wall as a single item. However, it soon became clear that this plan was both impractical and time-consuming. For this reason, the drawers have been mounted on sheets of mdf, 6mm thick (to avoid buckling). Each panel has a 6cm strip free on the top edge to enable them to be individually screwed to the support struts; each board therefore carries its own weight. Whilst the drawers act as a metaphor for entrapment and for events or secrets hidden from the outside world they also, as a component of domestic objects in a previous life, have witnessed certain actions within various homes and many of these may have been detrimental to women. The scale of the work, it reaches floor to ceiling of the gallery wall, refers to the huge impact that secrets and lies have on family relationships.





24 *Secrets and Lies*, one panel.  
90cm high by 1.20m wide by 15mm deep

### ***Homage to Helma Schwitters***

Found paper pieces, cotton thread, pvc glue.  
1.40 m. x 1.40 m.

The idea of a patchwork item was prompted by the pieced together appearance of the drawer fronts. However, it developed more specifically from contextual study into feminist art from the late 1960s and 1970s.

Although many forms of needlework exhibit a continuum of female creative endeavour, as noted in Chapter Two, sewing itself could be a double-edged sword, a form of oppression as well expression - interminable work that locates women in the home. Quilt making has its roots in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, but patchwork did not become fashionable until the 1790s when cheap and plentiful supplies of cotton encouraged more women to make them. Quilts offered women an opportunity to express the truths about their lives. Some women

chose to express political views through the symbolic language of pattern, as in the pattern called the *Radical Rose* design<sup>xii</sup> or through more direct means such as Bible narrative (Witzling 1992: 355). The fabrics used for quilts often held meaning for their makers, and quilts were used to mark special occasions such as marriage and births. Although for years the art world ignored and disparaged quilts as women's work they are today deemed worthy as an art form and are acquired by museums; some worked by women in history, others by contemporary artists.<sup>xiii</sup>

The title of my patchworked tablecloth, *Homage to Helma Schwitters*, is in recognition of the wife of Kurt Schwitters. It also represents all the women whose artistic and other possible career opportunities are sidelined or put on hold because of their domestic situations. As already noted, the artist Kurt Schwitters used found pieces from the street in his collaged artworks to remove the boundary between art and lived experience. It seemed entirely appropriate, therefore, that the collage and the quilting art form should come together as a metaphor for the lived experience of women, and so began the ritual of finding scraps of paper and other detritus that could be stitched together. Its form as a tablecloth was chosen because the table arrangement is perhaps the most recognisable form of still life, and the octagonal shape of the component parts, traditionally entitled, *Grandmother's Garden*, was chosen to symbolise the multi-tasking of most modern women. The pieces found were first washed lightly (at this stage many disintegrated), and stuck together to form an abstract octagonals; which were then stitched together.

Once again, the artwork invites close inspection and here the viewer will note shopping lists, recipes and other snatches of domestic life, sweetie papers, wallpaper, fragments from packaged goods and luggage labels, etc. My favourite piece is a drawing entitled *My Mum* ( middle right). The drawing resembles Wilhelm de Kooning's *Woman* series (painted in the 1950s); naked and slightly demonic looking. I found the drawing in an unidentified and discarded school exercise book and have no knowledge of the gender of the artist, (although I suspect a pubescent male). I am reminded of the pre- history figurine *Venus*, mentioned in Chapter One - fat, fertile and crucial to the survival of the species.

The tablecloth has, because of its source material, a battered and worn aesthetic, which is entirely appropriate, due to the histories and symbolism of the component parts. The tablecloth has been almost entirely stitched in the company of my elderly and ailing mother. She has in fact stitched several pieces herself. These have been done in red cotton. Patchwork and quilt making were traditionally collaborative efforts and I feel that our shared experience adds another layer to the tablecloth, especially as her life is reflective of many women's stories. A bright scholarship student, she unfortunately was never able to reach her full potential due to class and financial restrictions. A life, not of her first choice, then took over. My mother understood entirely the symbolism of the tablecloth and enjoyed immensely her involvement with it.



25 *Homage to Helma Schwitters* work in progress

### *Loaded*

Recycled Hotpoint washing machine  
acrylic paint, glass objects,  
wooden platform covered with carpet  
dimensions 2.50m high x 1m<sup>2</sup>

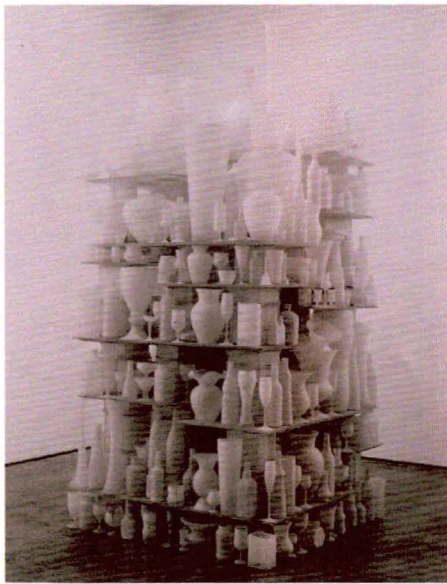
The washing machine had finished its working life and when I came across it, it was lying in a field, thrown aside, a symbol of western consumerism. It had a very 'lived experience' look, was elegant in shape, and definitely had potential as a reconfigured art work. Still clinging to it were the wringer and the agitator. It arrived in my studio via the workshop of a friend who had the necessary tools to remove the wringer (which was heavily laden with old grease), cut the tub in half, making the whole object more manageable and to fit wheels onto its legs. It sat in the studio quietly observing me, while I observed it until one day I decided that this beast of burden should become a wedding cake. The Wedding Day is traditionally an occasion full of promise. The ritual of cutting the cake, a high

point of the wedding day when the bride waves a knife, not in defence, but in order to wish for a bright and happy future. The idea for my found washing machine involved creating three tiers, mimicking the tiers of a wedding cake each comprising small cells. The cells were metaphors for the psychological traumas and frustrations within some domestic environments. They were also references to the niches in which early still lifes were painted. Within these cells I planned to include folded cloth, and to place small objects.

The model I envisaged would be reminiscent of Vivienne Binns' *Tower of Babel*, a pyramid of open boxes filled with complex personal assemblages by family and friends. At this point, the machine was also to be covered in plaster to suggest the icing of a traditional cake. A model was prepared and I had lessons in making plaster and adhering it to a metal surface. The bases of each tier were cut from wood, each of which was given a central hole to fit over a metal rod. The rod was bolted to the base and the tiers bolted to the rod. The cells were cut from masonite and glued to each tier. Unfortunately, at this point the cake looked very architectural and difficult to read. I removed the lot, an action which was described in a critique session as having "stripped the bride bare". We went back, the machine and I, to observing one another until Louise Bourgeois' use of glass inspired a new vision. Ironically, the fantasy became a reality when the tiers were used to create the stand for the wedding cake of a friends daughter; waste not want not.

The work of Tony Cragg, (b.1949) the British sculptor who has explored the world of the discarded man-made objects has also been influential for this work,

particularly his work entitled *Cumulus* (1995). *Cumulus* is a stack of sand blasted glass objects. Sand blasting has disguised their detail and possible uses. The transparency of the glass has also gone. Re- configured as a stack, they surrender themselves to the comfort and security of a group, exactly as Morandi's objects do. Morandi was also known to paint his objects and to let dust accumulate on them so as to disguise their previous life.



26 Tony Cragg, *Cumulus*, 1995, Tate Modern, London.

With *Cumulus* and *Le Defi* in mind, I determined that the tiers would be made of glass rounds (no holes - holes it was suggested might weaken the shelf). Each shelf is separated by three preserving jars (sourced from the CWA), the shelves are laden with domestic glass found in second-hand shops. Every component holds memory and every piece is symbolic of fragility and vulnerability. The objects within this work symbolise how the promise of a bright future, symbolised by the wedding cake, is simultaneously undermined. The washing



machine highlights the drudgery of domestic labour even while it promises to be a labour-saving device.

A circular fluorescent light sits in the tub adding translucence to the object, and the final touch was to spray paint the tub. Research into this process quickly concluded with it being done by a spray painter, well used to the toxic materials involved. The machine, in the gallery, stands on a platform of patterned carpet. The fragility of the tiers, which are loaded with glass objects, is symbolic of the many balancing acts that women perform both in their emotional and domestic lives. The glass is mainly clear and some of it is broken. The objects stand as metaphors for memory, for lives and promises fractured and broken.



27 *Loaded* mark 1



28 *Loaded* mark 2 work in progress

### ***Only Brides Iron their Sheets***

Stained, damaged and repaired newsprint paper  
Sheets of variable size.  
dimensions 2.5m x 3m.

The title came from the reminiscences of a woman recalling her mother's life, 'Tuesday was ironing day. I've always liked the smell of ironed linen, but Mum said, "Only brides iron their sheets" (Bell 1987: 17). For me, this statement conjures up a wonderful image of a woman who quickly learned to cut corners under the weight of domestic servitude.

I had, for some time, been playing with the idea of folded cloth as, first, symbolic of domestic labour and secondly, in recognition of the many women who fold away their dreams and ambitions for a life beyond the home. However, a chance find of a roll of damaged newsprint paper offered a more than suitable substitute for cloth as it added the element of fragility to the work. I repaired sheets of the paper with a needle and thread, liked the result and continued experimenting, further damaging the paper by staining, crushing and ironing it. I rubbed in white conté crayon to give it a surface, patched the holes, and added some script, odd pieces of lace and crochet. The final stage involved giving the sheets a coating of matt poly varnish,

The result is a parchment with a skin-like appearance. The stitching could be read as suturing, the stains as the marks of life, and suggestive of fragility and vulnerability. The simplicity of this work is in total contrast to the weight of the symbolism it carries. The symbolic associations suggested by the suturing relate



to the repairing of wounds both emotional and physical, trying, for example, to paper over the cracks of domestic existence, an allusion to woman's role as carer of others. The sheets are metaphors for linen objects, for repetitive domestic chores, and for women's subjective experiences. Using paper rather than cloth heightens the sense of brittleness and lack of protection, that many women experience in their daily lives. The paper hangs in three tiers, along a three metre length of the gallery wall, reminiscent of both washing and wallpaper from a domestic interior.



29 *Only Brides Iron Their Sheets 1 sheet*

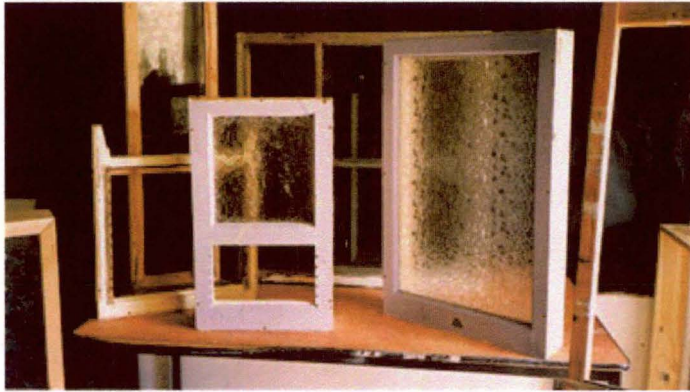
### ***Keep it in the Family***

Recycled windows,  
Electric lights  
2 tables  
acrylic paint  
dimensions 2.15m high x 3m long x 75cm wide

Nineteen windows stand on tables against the gallery wall under subdued gallery lighting. The windows have all been recycled from domestic locations and have been mounted on a frame to create a box. Ten are lit from within by a 7-watt low energy bulb on an electric lead and hang within the frame like an internal domestic ceiling light. Patterned glass hides the internal view. The notion of privacy suggested by the opaque glass, belie the desire to break free from a claustrophobic and sometimes dangerous situation. The tables give the installation height. They also refer to the traditional still life as being almost always an object, or group of objects, on a table; the table is central component of daily activity and of the routines of daily life. The looped electric cords have not been disguised, since our lives are entangled with technology.

Jacques Lacan describes the glass of store windows as being the hinge between the imaginary and the real, and suggests that glass is both a barrier and an invitation (Plant1993: 84). This description brings to mind the rows of windows in the suburbs which at night exude the warmth of a cosy interior. However, it is not necessarily a warm environment on the inside. This work refers to the familial desire for privacy that so often protects terrible truths. I have titled it *Keep it in the Family*; an expression I heard many times whilst growing up; one did not speak of family concerns outside of the home. Women who experience

both intellectual and physical violence often keep their secret 'in house' because of embarrassment, fear and in many cases because they have been convinced, that they deserve their treatment.



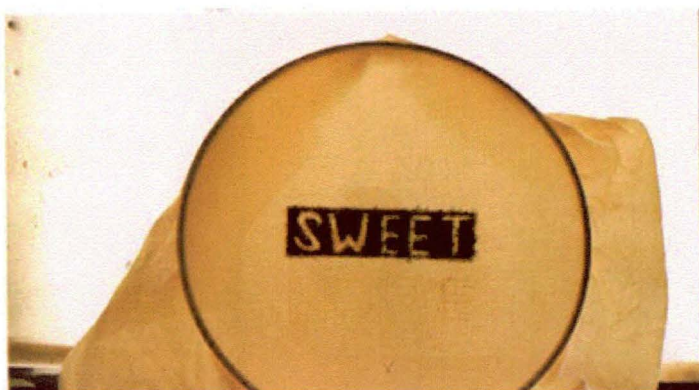
30 *Keep it in the Family, in progress*

### ***Home Sweet Home***

Embroiderer's frame  
Metal pins and canvas

The pins were sourced from a second-hand shop and the frame and canvas were bought. The pins and the frame reference the art of sewing, particularly samplers which were a beginner's piece of embroidery worked as a specimen of skill and which usually contained mottoes, such as home sweet home or similar - all relevant to domestic bliss or duty. Bourgeois claims that "the needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim for forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin" (Centro Cultural 1998:35) This work is intended to express this aggression and anger. The pins also refer to witchcraft, i.e. the notion that you could cast a spell on something, or more usually someone, by sticking pins into a doll. Historically

witchcraft has negative associations for women, many of whom were accused of sorcery should things go awry within their area of concern the domestic - for example, children or domestic animals born with abnormalities. Pins are also suggestive of pain. Like samplers of old, the embroidery hangs on the wall.



31 *Home Sweet Home* work in progress

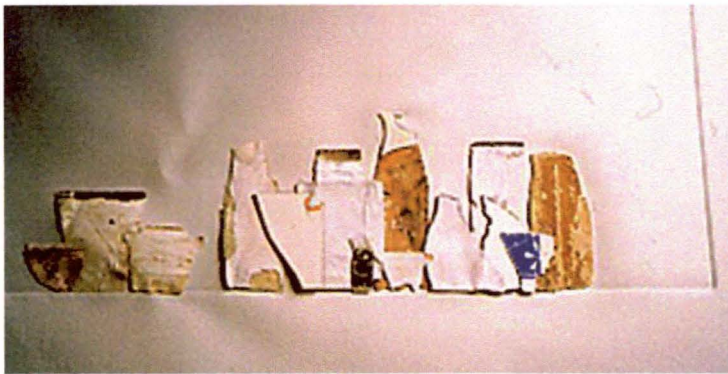
### *Still Life 1-9*

Torn paper mounted on BFK 280gsm  
56x76cm.

These works directly reference Giorgio Morandi's still life paintings. The pieces of paper were, like those in the tablecloth, found on the street and, in their new role, act both as containers of memory and carriers of new meaning. My intention with these works is to connect to the tradition of still life. Morandi's concerns were an exploration of formal values and his family of forms, jugs and pots are as timeless as those used for centuries in the domestic arena. Most of his works are small (30x45cm approx.), featuring familiar, repeated objects. Morandi was known to strip his objects of identifying labels and to allow dust to



gather on them. Grouped together as in a family photograph the objects stand enigmatically in space. These are the characteristics I wished to achieve in the collages. The paper used was gathered from the street, and its patina was gained and its origins masked by feet and weather. The groups of 'objects' are small and intimate, a characteristic enhanced by the large sheet on which they are mounted. The collages evoke humility they are about private space which is the opposite of the monumental and grand, the public space. The embossed rectangles (large press, pressure 2.b) in which the collages sit are enigmatic. The shelf in a kitchen? A window? The 'objects' sit quietly observing events around them. They are the silent witnesses.



32 *Still Life* – Collage pieces laid out ready for assembly

## **Conclusion and Significance of the Project**

This project has developed a visual language for expressing the experiences of women within the home, especially those experiences which are normally not spoken of but which are suppressed by a façade of respectability and domestic harmony. My practice, which has been informed by a knowledge of the traditional meanings instilled in domestic objects in still life and genre painting, has sought to overturn these meanings, highlighting the patriarchal assumptions embedded in the tradition.

The exhibition includes re-cycled objects that already hold memories of past domestic experiences. These have been reworked to build on these memories and to give the objects a new symbolic function. Paper and glass are materials chosen deliberately as metaphors of vulnerability and fragility. The objects made from these materials are symbolic of the repetitive nature of domestic tasks. The process of stitching is symbolic of repair and compromise.

In these respects my works build on the legacy of the feminist artists such as Chicago et al. Each in her own way has subverted the traditional symbolism of domestic objects as emblems of a virtuous femininity, revealing a more disturbing aspect of domestic existence. Marcus, Binns, Fuller, Bourgeois, Ringgold, Schapiro, Chicago, Whiteread and Hartoum all deploy domestic objects to express a wide variety of subjective concerns including displacement, and racial, ethnic and gender identity. My work is focused on gender issues and grew out of my experience as a young married woman in the 1960s, and is

reinforced by frequent media coverage of the difficulties that some women experience in their homes.

In the 70s and 80s Chicago and Schapiro focused on traditional female crafts, re-activating them in a contemporary art context. Bourgeois' oeuvre also deploys stitching and the use of soft materials to expand on her experiences as a child. I, too, make reference to the female crafts, particularly in *Homage to Helma*. I also draw on the use of collage and found object techniques derived from the dadaists and surrealists to evoke memory and the lived experience. In the small paper collages I reference the tradition of still life painting, particularly the works of Morandi.

My research supports the notion that the tradition of the still life is not moribund but can be re-worked in ways which speak directly of contemporary issues concerning women's changing social position. Domestic objects standing like sentinels within our homes, watching and absorbing those events which take place therein, are the perfect tools with which to make art. However, rather than being used to moralise and denigrate the domestic area and those who occupy it, they can also be a tool with which to highlight women's subjective experience.

For future research opportunities I should like to explore ways of extending the use of objects as visual metaphors beyond the domestic experience. I consider that the booklet is one way of doing this and will seek funding to develop this small booklet into a more substantial production. Rather than focus on the domestic environment, I envisage a book that embraces universal concerns such

as migration, ethnicity and spirituality; many people hold onto objects that evoke these concerns.



## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Paintress is the word used in the pottery industry to describe the women who paint ware either on-glaze or under-glaze (Buckley 1990: 8).

<sup>ii</sup> Research commissioned by Lisa Smorsaski and reported by Arthur Martin in *The Daily Mail* 6.10.09

<sup>iii</sup> *Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas*, (Vanity of vanities, all is vanity)

<sup>iv</sup> I am reminded at this point of the *Rajah Quilt* of 1841. 180 convict women had made the Quilt during their voyage aboard the transport ship *Rajah*. A humanitarian group, The British Ladies Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners, had provided the materials. It is now held in the National Library in Canberra.

<sup>v</sup> The term, “The Angel in the House” describing the Victorian ideal of womanhood, derives from Coventry Patmore’s 19<sup>th</sup> century epic poem (1845 – 62), by the same name.

<sup>vi</sup> Georgia Blains novel, *Births, Deaths and Marriages* published in 2008, tells of a family terrorised by the threat and practice of physical violence at the hands of their father. Family photographs and photographic spreads in *The Women’s Weekly*, of that time, (the father was a well known TV personality) show the family appearing all smiles, belying the truth of the situation.

<sup>vii</sup> In 17<sup>th</sup> century works the upturned cup was symbolic of emptiness (Negrin 1997: 7). In genre paintings, especially the middle class interiors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Impressionists, women drinking tea in bourgeois settings re-inforced the ideology of the woman as comfortable in the domestic space. Even today tea is the great comforter in times of tension, and strongly associated with women. Also, in the stories of objects provided by friends at the start of this project (see booklet) there is more than one reference to the teacup and to the teapot. One in particular, Tim’s mother’s pot references hidden family secrets.

<sup>viii</sup> The group photograph is a notoriously unreliable record of truth, consisting of arrangements of people all smiling for the camera and the occasion, giving no hint to the underlying family enmities and dramas (Kuhn 1995: 56).

<sup>ix</sup> An exhibition entitled *Morandi's Legacy: Influences on British Art*, curated by Paul Coldwell was held on 12 January – 25 March 2006 at Abbot Hall, Art Gallery, Kendal, UK. (Coldwell: 2006). In a series of interviews, participating artists reveal the influence that Morandi has had on their work.

<sup>x</sup> An example is Egyptian artist Ghada Amer who uses needle and thread to stitch large canvases. In 1991 Amer produced a work entitled *cinq femmes au travail* (*five women at work*) which shows women doing domestic chores – shopping, cooking, cleaning and caring for children. The fifth non-depicted woman, is the artist herself. She is elusive and absent, yet visible in the traces she has left (Grosenick 2001: 30).

<sup>xi</sup> The Foster Gallery, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Place (Village)*. 15 Oct 2008 – 25 January 2009.

<sup>xii</sup> Until they were themselves enfranchised, women had no means of expressing opposing political views to those of their husbands or fathers. However, in the American Civil War, the *radical rose design* had a black centre to each rose and was a surreptitious expression of sympathy with the slaves (Chadwick 1985: 207).

<sup>xiii</sup> Tracy Emin's confessional work, *To Meet My Past*, and a quilt by Grayson Perry which features images of foetuses, a reference to the debate about the ethics of abortion, will feature in an exhibition entitled *Quilts 1700 to 2010* presented by the Victoria and Albert Museum London, UK, from March 20 to July 4 2010.

## List of Illustrations

1. Royal Worcester vase, signed Kitty Blake.
2. Hand paintresses at work at Wedgewood's Etruria factory c1990 (image, Buckley1990: photograph number 5).
3. Harmen Steenwyck, *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanitas of Human Life* c1640 Oil on oak 39.2x 50.7, London, National Gallery (image, Rüger 2001: 29)
4. Johannes Vermeer, *The Lace Maker* 1665-68, oil on canvas 24 x 21cm, Musee de Louvre, Paris. (image, Chadwick 1996: 126)
5. Jan Steen (1626-1679), *The Disorderly Household*, oil on canvas 77.9 x 88.6cm Apsley House, London. (image, Bryson 2001: 112)
6. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Young Schoolmistress*, probably 1735-6, oil on canvas 61.6 x 66.7, National Gallery, London. (image, Morphet 2000: 128)
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10. Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life* 1962, oil on canvas 30cm x 30cm, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh. (image, Coldwell 2006: 58)

11. Donna Marcus, *Delphinus*  
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